Concluding Session

Philosophical and Ethical Perspectives on Inter-National and Cross-Cultural Communication and Cooperation in the World Community

INTRODUCTION

In our concluding session we turned to our philosopher colleague Russell Hardin who had been sitting patiently taking notes for the entire four days of the conference. We asked him and expected him to reflect upon some of the world community or communitarian assumptions underlying the ideals of reciprocal communication which had been our guiding theme. For concluding observations and comments upon both Hardin’s paper and upon our conference we turned to our Indian colleague, Ashis Nandy, and our African colleague Dismas Masolo.


Straddling Lines*

RUSSELL HARDIN

I come to this conference as an outsider on so many dimensions that I’m often not sure which boundary I’m crossing — or transgressing. Usually, however, I like the confusion. One of the beauties of this group is that everyone in it can feel like an outsider. Forgive this personalizing of the discussion. But the room and conversation are full of anthropologists, and your style is infectious. I have learned many corrupting things from you. For example, until a couple of days ago it never occurred to me that I could other someone, but I suspect now that I know how it’s done, I’ll do it all the time. And not only unintentionally.

Back to personalizing. Almost a year ago I was at a conference on nationalism and ethnic identification. At the beginning, we all introduced ourselves. I was early in line and I told my story of academic affiliation and interest and why I was writing on this topic. The next person told the story of his own ethnic identity and he suggested we all do likewise because we must all have strong identifications. Of one thing he was virtually certain — none of us was merely American, which he said was an empty category. Everyone after him then gave an ethnic identity. As he suspected, all had very strong identifications as French-American, Armenian-American, South-African-while-reluctantly-sliding-into-American, Jewish-American, and emigre Russian. Almost everyone was born outside North America or was a first generation North American. At the completion of the circle, I was asked to divulge my story. The best I could do was say I was American. Everything else in my past and heritage had blended into nothing distinctively recognizable or motivating. The nearest thing to an identity I would really claim was roughly the academic identity I’d given. Even that one is fractured. I am part social scientist, part philoso-
pher, almost always interested in bringing the normative and the positive together against the best intentions of virtually all my colleagues. Sometimes I think I straddle more boundaries than there are.

In our ethnic biographies, one might think we were doing different things. Most of the group were genuinely telling who they were. I was telling what I identified with. As John MacAlloon mentioned, Eric Erickson supposed the central problem of identity as identification, what motivates you, not what characteristics you have. I shared Erickson's view of identity. And at bottom, what I identified with was Gananath Obeyesekere's Buddhist selflessness or absence of self, at least insofar as self was culturally or ethnically determined. The others, some people might say, were really telling who they were, they were only giving objective understandings. I think that is wrong. They were also, and quite genuinely, telling what they identified with. They just did identify with ethnic aspects of their lives.

Why could I not answer as the others had done? I was a Huguenot, Scots, Irish, English, Tennessee hillbilly, Texas American, long since migrated into the world of enlightenment-project, world-class universities. With a relatively similar history, apart from the overwhelmingly important fact that she is a woman, Ruth Behar reported her own origins and then called herself, with evident feeling, a Cubana (Incidentally, to me, this was the most astonishing moment of the entire conference). I might as well have declared myself a hillbilly, although I left the hills at age nine and never expect to return to live there again. The hills and their culture do not motivate me.

I want to address four points, the first of which is illustrated by this brief history and, I should add, by this perplexity. The first point is why and how we come to have the identifications (in Erickson's sense of what we identify with) that we have. If we do not have those, it would not matter that we have the quasi objective identities we have as Sephardic-Ashkenazy-Turkish-Cuban-American, Ivan Karp's Kenyan village elder who is Presbyterian, or whatever. How our identification might matter will be the sec-

ond point. The third point is how our theoretical accounts are justified when they violate our subjects' self-understandings, as they typically do. Theorizing human behavior is the ultimate translation. The fourth point is the recent rise of the political theorists' variant of ethnic identity: the odd "theory" of communitarianism. Superficially, only the last of these may sound like a matter of ethics. Because all of these issues centrally involve welfare, however, I think they are all moral matters. As Ramanujan says, translation has consequences – barbers flock to Hamilton Bridge by false translation. So too do they have consequences. It is therefore necessarily moral.

How Do We Get an Identity?

Here I do not wish to say much beyond raising the question. We tend to assume people have identities in Erickson's sense. This is not merely to be assumed but to be explained. Its explanation sounds like a natural project for anthropology, but virtually all of our discussion has merely assumed it. My own project, "Self Interest, Group Identity," gives a rational choice explanation of identification that people develop, but it would take too long to make that argument here. I doubt that the argument would be the first choice of most of you.

Incidentally, explaining how someone gets an identity may say a lot about the morality of the identity or of action from it. One of the peculiarities of identity talk is the tendency to suppose that the mere fact of an identity makes certain actions right. This popular move is an instance of the derivation of a moral from a descriptive fact, of an 'ought' from an 'is.' This move may be related to the tendency, noted by John Gumperz, to suppose that, because 'self' is a noun, it must be a thing.

What Difference Does Identity Make?

My second point is one which I seemingly always raise in Milton Singer's seminars. I always have the sense that, in those seminars, most of the discussion is about how we discuss things. As a philosopher I should have no trouble with that. But as a political sci-
entist I keep wanting to spend at least some of the time actually discussing things. The issue is what difference does any of our understanding of these things make and how can our understanding affect these things for the better?

Perhaps another personalization will help steer the discussion in clear directions. Few multisyllabic words have been used more frequently than “deconstruction” and its variants the past few days. Insofar as I understand deconstruction I am – forgive this outrage – a deconstructionist. A deconstructionist takes conventional notions, icons, myths, and so forth apart and demystifies them. Remarkably, with slightly different wording that is more a matter of disciplinary tastes than of meanings, that is what analytic philosophers do. Bertrand Russell, the early Wittgenstein, and many of their forebears from Hobbes and Locke to Hume and Mill were analysts: They analyzed evidently complex terms into simpler components to make clearer, less mystified sense of the wholes. Philosophical analysis is now in decline in the Anglo-Saxon world. The one area in which it is still being productively put to work is in ethics and social philosophy. Partly that is just because ethics was long dominated by intuitionism. In intuitionism, I know something is good or right, bad or wrong when I see it; there are no rules to learn, deductions to make. This was one of the stupidest movements in the history of philosophy. It was finally displaced by metaethics – the study of the role and meaning of ethical terms and judgments – and finally in the past couple of decades by ordinary analysis.

Ashis Nandy worries that we try to overcome our cultural differences at our peril, that we somehow need the mystery of these differences. I'll not try to deal with that claim at its broadest. I'm not at all sure it's true in any detail, but I think neither he nor I knows enough to argue compellingly. Moreover, I think it extremely likely that some aspects of those differences should be understood well in order for us to prevent the carnage and other forms of shackling of life prospects that they drive.

Consider two ways in which identification might matter. First, it could matter simply at the individual level, so that the individual reacts with openness or hostility to every other, depending on whether the other is in the individual's group. If evidence is of any value, this seems not to work for most people most of the time. Bosnians of many ethnic backgrounds have usually lived in relative harmony. Now they happen to be murdering each other.

Second, identification might matter when structural constraints of whatever kind make it potentially beneficial to be a member of the prevailing group. If our former Soviet Republic is going to have its own independent government, my group will want to be in power and so will yours. While the Russians were in power we might have been able to compete relatively evenly with each other for positions in the economy and government. With one of our groups in power, the other group may suffer and we have good collective reason to fight. We are suddenly in a variant of Hobbes's state of nature with no powerful authority over us to maintain peace. Once we start fighting there may then be no endogenous solution for our conflict other than gross repression, up to and including genocide of fear the future. Yet we are the same peoples who might have lived splendidly together for the entire lifetimes of all of us. Brutality, ethnic cleansing, and so forth are not part of our ethnic identification. They are merely a means to protection of that identification. If this is true, then probing the psychology of ethnic violence is likely to be less helpful than trying to regulate the conditions that give incentive for it. Seen this way, the problem is game theoretic and it requires structural resolutions, resolutions that change incentives. For the short run I presume we must agree with Ruth Benedict that our task is to make the word, or various bits of it, safe for cultural differences.

In characterizing recent events in Yugoslavia, Bud Mehan associated the carnage with "taking the lid off." I think this is the wrong way to view the problem if it is supposed that the conflicts are natural and will come out if not controlled. They are merely potential until the incentive structure is right (or wrong, one should say). This is the sense in which Hervé Varene noted, correctly,
that greater understanding need not end violence. As Varenne said, discussion can clarify, but not alter, the fact that there is no wine in the cafeteria of Woodward Court dormitory. And in Yugoslavia and in the focus-group marketing of the American president, it can even worsen violence and conflict by revealing how deep the divisions might be, by revealing how the conflict might be exploited.

Incidentally, the same point can be made against Habermasian claims for the beneficial value of political discourse. Robert Manoff said that the state-centered view of our world is inadequate to the current problems of civil society. He notes the efflorescence of civil society in parts of central Europe, as though they could show the rest of us the way. I think that is a gross misreading. Civil society receives enthusiastic expression only in moments of state collapse. It cannot be maintained at a perpetual high level – who wants to be ardently political all the time? 1989 and 1787-88 were extraordinary years that made relatively ordinary men such as Vaclav Havel and James Madison seem like intellectual giants, almost political theorists. Madison lasted nearly fifty years longer as a political leader; Havel may have faded already in a year’s time. But their initial successes are about all we can expect of civil society until the next crisis comes. Indeed, they are all we should want of it.

**Whose Choices, Whose Theory?**

John MacAlloon, Jim Fernandez, and others referred to the dilemma of the cultural broker. This is an analog of the problem of the theorist trying to explain actors. I’d like to address this problem briefly, although this is a group more alert to the issue than are most social scientists. I’ll speak in my own academic language, the language of rational choice. But I am chastened by Gananath Obeyesekere’s remark that rational and irrational are not a conflictual pair in Buddhist thought.

Seemingly the harshest criticism of rational choice theory is that it is unrealistic. People are not like that, people do not calculate, they are not overwhelmingly self interested. Just ask them. Maybe Machiavelli and Hobbes were overwhelmingly self seeking, but not Hume, Mill, and the rest of us. Rational choice may be for theorists, but it is not for people. This is a strange criticism because it is, in fact, not specific to rational choice theory. For example, contemporary anthropologists speak a language virtually no one else speaks – certainly the peoples they study do not speak it. Many sociologists cannot even understand their own vocabulary – the people who are their subjects have no chance. Psychology is almost entirely about ununderstood influences on the self and unperceived motivations. Economists also speak a rarefied language. The subjects of their inquiry often can understand and do even use much of the economists’ vocabulary, especially in advanced industrial states in which economists have played large roles in setting the public agenda. But it would be egregious to claim that ordinary people regularly, consciously use economic reasoning outside the money market realm, and maybe not even much within that realm.

If we finally construct a rational choice theory of something, we will often want to claim we have an understanding or an explanation of real people’s behavior. Yet we will come to that understanding only through a great deal of hard work by a lot of people. Those whose rational behavior we think we explain have generally not gone through any such analytical effort. Moreover, many of them might deny the relevance of our account to their behavior and motivations. This may be the biggest thorn in all of social theory, whether normative or positive, whether rational choice or other.

How can we justify an intentionalist account of behavior when the actor claims not to have the relevant intention or, even worse, seems not to understand such an intention? This is an issue that should bother most social scientists in almost all of their work. In many contexts we simply reduce motivations to instincts, but such a move would not be pleasing in our major theories. For example, rational choice often seems to require conscious reasoning, even calculation well beyond instincts. Acting according to symbols whose meanings are unconscious, as in the anthropological theo-
ties of Claude Lévi-Strauss, also must often require conscious attention to the symbols. Or following a primordial attachment to one’s own group would require conscious attention, perhaps always, but certainly in cases in which ethnicity is not instantly discernible.

Systems theorists might seem to escape the problem by asserting that phenomena at the system level need not be deduced from phenomena at the individual level. But even the systems theorist will commonly suppose there are psychological implications of system-level phenomena that lead to actions that compose the system-level results. For example, Anatol Rapoport supposes that people in mobs behave differently, irrationally, according to a specific mob psychology. The explanation of these psychological phenomena, perhaps especially when they seem to be individually irrational, is still as problematic as it is in the individual-level theories.

We could go on with virtually every theory worthy of any of the complexity of the lives of those it covers. Even accounts of the seeming irrationality or inconsistency of behavior face the same problem. For example, Jon Elster’s (Elster 1983) account of adaptive preference formation, as when I change my preferences to match my possibilities in such phenomena as sour grapes, is an account that I, the actor, am unlikely to share as an explanation of my behavior. Hence, virtually all social and psychological theorists are together in their problem of using theories and vocabularies that defy the thought of those whose actions they are supposed to explain. The theories of Lévi-Strauss and other structuralists preemptively elevate this apparent problem to central dogma while the theorists of most other schools do not. This move does not resolve our explanatory problem. We still must wonder how it works even if we might agree with the structuralist that it works.

The question here is not always perplexing. For example, as Michael Polanyi has forcefully argued, there can be knowledge that is tacit in the sense that one can know things one cannot say. For example, in some behavioral experiments, shock treatments were administered whenever a particular nonsense syllable ap-
that I put my conscious mind to the task. It may be true that most of our seemingly rational actions are themselves not fully consciously justifiable. Psychologists and rational choice theorists cannot even explain themselves to themselves. It should not be surprising that those who have given no thought to the psychology or rationality of their actions might reject or fail to comprehend our explanations of behavior. In the case of shock treatments, we might suppose genetically developed mechanisms handle the phenomenon. That may be harder to suppose for very complex choice contexts, such as voting for one’s interests or identifying with an ethnic group.

Plausibly every social and psychological theory worth thinking about violates agents’ understandings of their behavior and motivations. Part of the difference may simply be tacit knowledge. Polanyi has a relatively sanguine view of the role of such knowledge. I sympathize too much with Ishiguro’s woeful butler Stevens, to have so sanguine a view. And perhaps part of the problem is that agents often require knowledge from their own experience to have it be psychologically motivating enough to guide further actions and judgments. As Jessica Anderson says, “impersonal knowledge has not much cutting edge” (Anderson 1984: 119). But the major part of the difference is presumably that any theory that has had serious work put into it must have transcended the already known or common sense understanding. That is the role of theory. Our problem is not that theory is wrong because it fails to represent what agents consciously intend or understand. Our problem is that we do not have a good account of how we can justify a claim that some theory trumps the agent’s vision in a particular case.

Communitarianism

Until quite recently, there was one value that was central to every major western moral or political theory: universalism. In the past two decades, political theorists have proposed the first genuinely anti-universalist theory: communitarianism. Many of the contemporary communitarian critics of universalist moral and political theories argue against the methodological individualist assumptions of many such theories. They note that human identity is socially, not individually, constituted. One must readily grant that much of human identity is socially constituted. Indeed, the view that we might individually bootstrap ourselves into our identities is ludicrous, and evidently no one argues for such a view. To be made cogent, the communitarian criticism must eventually yield a principle or theory of the good in which at least some of the good is constituted by groups for their members. Charles Taylor makes a direct attempt to do just that in his argument for “irreducibly social goods.”

Taylor sets up his discussion by first noting that there are many collective goods but that he is concerned with a class of goods that are not like these. Military forces for national defense and a local dam against a rampaging river are collective goods. If they are provided to you, they may readily be provided to me as well without any additional cost. These material goods are instrumentally good. They protect us against attack from enemies or floodwaters. The goods we derive from them are not themselves—only the military are apt to love the weapons they use, and only the Army Corps of Engineers may love an actual dam. The goods we derive are peace and unflooded homes. The material goods of military force and dams causally produce these goods and are only therefore goods in themselves. If we could get peace and no floods some other way, we might dispense with the instrumental goods of military force and dams.

Taylor argues that it is quite otherwise with such goods as those of community and culture. The culture that we value is essentially linked to the good that we get from it. It is not merely a means to that good, it constitutes the good.

We might therefore suppose the culture of a particular people is worth fostering and preserving independently of that people’s benefit from it. Is that so? Well, plausibly, no. It might be worth preserving in order to protect the current members of the society from suffering the painful fate of surviving past their culture, as Ishi, the last Yahi Indian did in early twentieth-century California
(Kroeber 1976). But if there were no Ishi to care for there need be no value in preserving a Yahi culture. (There might be social scientific value in preserving it for study, but this is not relevant to Taylor’s thesis.) Yet Taylor says that a particular culture is “intrinsically good.” Either this is an odd use of ‘intrinsically’ or the claim is false. If the thousands of vanished cultures were intrinsically good, one might think effort should have been put into preserving them or should be put into recreating them. But many of those cultures were ill-suited to providing good lives to their members. Many of the cultures died from within, as individuals abandoned them for other opportunities.

Of six thousand languages currently spoken in the world, comparative linguists estimate about half will disappear within a century. This is not a mere guess or trend line projection. There are no longer any children speaking those languages. Some linguists evidently think this is a great loss and they think something should be done to give new life to these languages. One proposed solution is to establish “centers where children are taught and encouraged to use the threatened tongues.” For linguists and others interested in linguistic theory, perhaps it is a great loss. But it cannot be a great loss for the next generation of children from the cultures in which those languages are spoken. Children who grow up speaking, as principal language, a language spoken by only hundreds or a few thousands might reasonably feel cheated by their culture. And that culture would be intrinsically good?

Language, incidentally, is one of Taylor’s irreducibly social goods. All languages may be irreducibly social, but no one is intrinsically good. They are good only contingently. What makes one of them good is the contingent facts of who speaks it, what has been written in it, and what opportunities for personal growth and well-being it offers its speakers. Note that we need not argue against Taylor’s claim for intrinsic goodness by asserting that the good of a particular language or culture is merely instrumental. It may actually be good. But it is only contingently good. Remarkably, we may show it is good by giving an account of how it serves and affects individuals. It is individuals who are beneficiaries of a culture or of membership in a language community. Hence, methodological individualists are not prima facie precluded from arguing for the goodness of cultures.

Nevertheless, it is true, as Taylor wishes to show, that such goods as language and culture are irreducibly social in important respects. An individual cannot produce a serious language. Not even a sterling committee may be able to do so, as the doleful experience with Esperanto suggests. We cannot compromise on a blend of several languages to avoid giving unfair advantage to the natives of an actual language if we are to have an international lingua franca. A worthy language must be richly, socially produced.

But here again, we can agree with Taylor only in part. Language and many other good aspects of culture are produced collectively, they are in this sense irreducibly social. Even the possibility of enjoying many of the pleasures of the sports fan in boosting the local team is socially produced. But it does not follow from the way it is produced that the enjoyment of such a good is irreducibly social. The benefit I get from my culture is my benefit even though it may be constituted in part by my actions and beliefs as inculcated by that very culture. Just as with material goods, collective production or provision does not entail collective consumption. Indeed, it is hard to imagine what collective consumption would be. We can speak of collective provision of some particular thing. I pay taxes, it adds up to enough to provide a new highway. I participate in the use of the English language and help to determine its drift toward new forms just as you do. But when our cultural creations are consumed, they are consumed by us individually. I sit in my study and read Taylor, he sits in his study and reads Hegel. Despite the individual creativity of our authors, the learning that goes into our readings and the meanings of our texts are irreducibly social. Still, our reading is highly individual.

What is the core of truth that makes communitarianism an appealing theory to many peoples, especially including academics at world class, extremely universalistic and uncommunitarian universities? It is that a group may coordinate on any one of several possible ways of satisfying its members, any of which would
be good for them. Once it has coordinated on a particular way, that way may then be not merely good (as many alternative ways would be) but even better than any other way for the group. That way becomes better because it can mobilize members in their interest more readily than any alternative then can. Typically, such coordination has advantages of better communal information and understanding and of common expectations that make continued coordination easy, even effortless, and that enhance particular tastes and preferences that are satisfied by continued coordination. There is nothing more to the community good, no consideration over and above the benefits of coordination in general, including Herskovits’s concern with the benefits to the individual ego, to justify any particular coordination.

Could there be no scope for irreducibly social consumption of a good? Perhaps there could be. Love or friendship as a mutual relationship seems to depend not only on having two separate people contribute to creating and maintaining the relationship but also on having those two benefit from the relationship. That may suggest an opening to thinking of irreducibly social consumption on the larger scale of a whole polity rather than of a mere couple. So far, however, Taylor and other contemporary communitarians have not led us through that opening to anything grander.

In sum, anthropologists often note there are different values in different societies. Communitarian theorists moralize this observation into the odd claim that each group’s or society’s values are right for it. I want to understand anthropologists’ findings in rational choice terms. If it is successful, this move does not allow the communitarian move to justify the content of the diverse values. But it still leaves what one might call a communitarian residue: the sunk costs of each person’s upbringing and cultural knowledge. Economists sometimes consider sunk costs as merely bygones. For the communitarian residue, however, this view would be wrong to a large extent. Our sunk costs are us. Our cultural sunk costs have been transmuted into information and putative knowledge that is not merely gone. Much of it is a resource to us in our further actions – although much of it is perhaps an unfortunate resource, more nearly an obstacle, and we might wish it were gone.

Concluding Remarks

Back to personalization one more time. My remarks about crossing lines are almost entirely about the social scientific problem, the descriptive and explanatory problem. Moral theoretically, I am entirely universalistic, so there are no moral lines to cross. In part I should confess that I have two reasons for that commitment. First, it seems intuitively compelling. And second, I do not even understand any principle with a moral scope that is less than universalistic. Probably my chief interest in ethnicity has been driven by the effort to test this sense. So far, it has stood without serious challenge.

Notes

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  1. This section is borrowed from Russell Hardin, “Theory on the Prowl”.
  2. Kierkegaard is supposed to have said genius never desires what does not exist – sour grapes is the consolation of those less than genius.
  3. This section is borrowed from Russell Hardin, “Self Interest, Group Identity”.
  4. Some, however, argue against it. Michael Sandel argues against John Rawls’s theory of justice that it is grounded on what idealized individuals without cultural knowledge would choose. But such socially unencumbered people cannot exist and it is unclear how a theory based on their choices should be compelling to people as they actually occur (See Sandel 1982).
  5. Taylor speaks of public goods, but this is a terminology that leads to confusion for those who understand it in its technical sense in economics. Few if any goods are genuinely public, but many goods are collectively provided. Charles Taylor, “Irreducibly Social Goods”.
Science (11 January 1991) 251: 59. Only about five percent—about 300—of extant languages are safe against extinction. Because there are great debates about what constitutes a language (as opposed to a dialect), linguists may find these claims exaggerated, tendentious, or even meaningless.